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UNCLAS HARARE 002146

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: HEALTHCARE STRIKES "PARALYSE" PUBLIC HOSPITALS

1. Summary. Doctors and nurses, both defined by the GOZ as providers of "essential services" and thus precluded from striking, are engaged in industrial action based on wage demands. Economic realities increasingly compel workers of all levels to ignore GOZ laws which try to prevent them from striking. End summary.

2. Junior and mid-level doctors have initiated the all-but-annual healthcare strike, in which government health care professionals demand significant wage increases. After a similar strike last year, the Ministry of Health reviewed the duties of various health care professionals and assigned wages based on the resultant classifications. Doctors at government hospitals are now demanding an increase from Z\$378,000 per month to Z\$30,000,000 per month (an 80-fold increase from approximately US\$66.90 per month to US\$5,309.73 per month). "Casualty doctors," many of whom are paid a somewhat higher rate, have joined the strike. Reportedly, foreign doctors hired by the GOZ from Cuba and the DRC are the only ones who remain at work, while the GOZ's major referral hospitals are described as "paralysed" by the strike.

3. Nurses at government hospitals have also initiated their own strike, demanding an increase from their base wages, which range from Z\$138,446 to Z\$222,967 per month (US\$24.50 to US\$39.46 per month). Labor contacts report that the nurses are demanding wages in the vicinity of Z\$800,000 (US\$141.59) per month.

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COMMENT

4. Both the Hospital Doctors Association and the Zimbabwe Nurses Association are professional associations, which are historically concerned with maintaining professional standards and self-regulation of members. With the continuing economic decline, however, both organizations have taken on the traditional labor union functions of negotiating for wages and conditions of service. The GOZ is already engaged in negotiation with the doctors and will inevitably come to some compromise, even if it does not meet the doctors' US\$60,000 per annum demand. The demands of the nurses, since they are less burdensome, may be met in full.

5. Both doctors and nurses are prohibited from striking through their specific inclusion in the definition of "essential services" in Statutory Instrument 127 of 2003, which includes "any service... the interruption of which endangers immediately the lives, personal safety or health of the whole or any part of the public." Labor sources believe that all workers -- regardless of their designation of "essential" -- are increasingly inclined to ignore the GOZ pronouncements and engage in strikes based on wage demands. The GOZ is in a tight spot. It must negotiate with the doctors to keep its battered health-care system afloat, another cog in its once-enviable infrastructure that is rapidly crumbling. If salaries remain below US\$100 monthly, many doctors will emigrate. However, by giving in, the GOZ encourages all other "essential" services to follow suit. And in the current economic decline, with inflation at 455% and the parallel currency market running at 5650:1, there is little doubt that other "essential" services will comply.

SULLIVAN